Graphic Texts

Comics, graphic novels and manga (the Japanese word for comics) are a wonderful set of groups of texts that offer much to explore for readers of all ages, ranging from the simplest short humour story to multi-volume epics. Spanning a huge range of genres, they contain profound and powerful texts, as well as pleasurable, reassuring, and stimulating reads. In addition, they can play a part in encouraging enthusiastic reading amongst teenage (or young adult) readers.

What are graphic texts and how can we start to understand and explore them?

Whilst comics have often been typified in Britain as humourous texts for much younger children, it is important to keep in mind that the majority of what is published today that takes the form of the comic is aimed at older readers. Indeed, in Britain, the history of the comic has always included material specifically for adults, from Ally Sloper's Half Holiday onwards, but the focus throughout most of the twentieth century was on material for children, in an increasingly segmented market that offered titles for specific ages and separately for boys and girls. For instance, in relation to girls, titles like Twinkle were produced for the youngest girls, Bunty for older readers and Jackie for teenagers. Some comics, like Beano and Dandy (two of the very few weekly British comics still in existence), were seen as for all readers and titles specifically aimed at boys included Victor. This is a model that also appears in the Japanese manga industry, and means that the texts produced, which is currently increasing in popularity amongst young adults, can be divided, like the British industry could, along lines of gender and age.

Graphic novels, in contrast, really begin to appear in the 1980s. The majority of these texts are aimed at adults or young adults, although there are titles that also appeal to younger readers, such as Bone by Jeff Smith. Whilst the comic in Britain tended to have one to three page stories that were either self-contained or ran for around fourteen weeks in a single narrative, the graphic novel format allows for more detailed and complex narratives to be developed. It may be a single volume, or a number (Bone, for instance, is in nine volumes) will contain a complete narrative and could be on any subject or genre. Manga also operates in a similar way, with multi-volume single narratives being the format which British readers are most familiar with, including the very popular girls' manga (the genre is called shojo) Fruits Basket by Natsuki Takaya. Whilst collections of short stories may also be called graphic novels (for instance Matt Groening's The Simpsons and Futurama) this is more about them being published in a bound volume than about what they contain.

The key to understanding these texts is to focus on the flexibility of the comic medium. At one extreme, it can be used to tell stories in a simple way. However, this same flexibility means that the comic can also tell phenomenally complex stories or explain difficult ideas. The central point is that this is a medium, rather than a genre (so thinking of comics simply as genres such as 'humour', or 'superhero' is counterproductive), and can be used to create demanding texts across a range of genres.

Further, the medium, whilst often associated with fiction, is also used to create non-fiction, including biographies and autobiographies, such as Art Speigelman's Maus (now used in schools alongside The Diary of Anne Frank) and Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood (the first volume works very well with teenagers, although the second is much more for an adult audience) or Ethel and Ernest (1998) by Raymond Briggs.

Briggs' work is a useful way into understanding comics as a medium, not a genre, in that he has created books that are factual and even biographical, alongside works that are located within fantasy. In addition, the medium allows the creator to address a wide age range. Briggs exemplifies this in that he has created works for all ages of reader, from the wide appeal of The Snowman to the politicised and adult or young adult When the Wind Blows.

Further, graphic texts can be 'text heavy' or 'text light' (those terms refer to the way that comics may combine a large number of words along with the images, or none at all). Again, Briggs' work functions as a useful reference point, with texts ranging from the wordless The Snowman through to the text heavy Fungus the Bogeyman.

Given the increasing complexity of the medium, if it is a long time since you have read any of these texts yourself, it will take some practice to get back into reading them. This is an absolute necessity when the aim is to share books with younger readers. Reading widely within the medium will help you to familiarize yourself with what has changed, but, particularly for female readers, I would recommend starting with Bryan Talbot's The Tale of One Bad Rat, which was designed to draw readers back into an engagement with the medium, as well as simply being a terrific book. It is also a powerful read for young adults.

The growth of the manga market is also an element that adds to the importance, and also the challenge, of becoming familiar with graphic texts, necessitating, as it does, reading in what may be an unfamiliar way. Generally, a younger reader new to manga will ask one simple question, 'Why do they start at the back?' Most of the Tokyopop and Viz titles sold in Britain are published in the original format, something which adds to their cachet. For those starting of with this type of graphic text, the publishers often include instructions on how to read them. There are variations, in that manga created by American and British writers is published in a more familiar format, such as Craig Conlon's Hairy Mary books. In addition, Korean comics (manhwa), also included in the collections of both of the publishers above also read from left to right. I would suggest trying Fruits Basket, or something like Jing: King of Bandits as ways in to understanding titles for girls and boys.

The flexibility of the medium means that when looking for titles, it is perhaps best to think about how you would wish to use them (for instance, The Simpsons as leisure reading, using Ethel and Ernest as a history text in a classroom, using manga to start a discussion on diversity with a youth group) and who you wish to use them with. Do not think of them as texts for less able readers aimed at encouraging them towards 'real' reading (i.e. of text based novels). It is worth noting, however, that emergent readers tend to be most enthusiastic about humour titles. Instead think of graphic texts as a parallel world to the world of the novel, with the same range of genres and where some texts are better written and illustrated, more engaging, more demanding, than

others. It is entirely possible to build comic collections that offer challenges to the good reader and support to the less enthusiastic, whether they are located at home, at school, or in libraries.

Views of Graphic Texts.

Comics have often been dismissed as a medium in Britain, something that reflects their history here, a situation very unlike that of much of Europe, where comics are a respected and honoured art form.

This is why, even today, in Britain, they are usually approached with caution by both libraries and schools, as their content has often been seen as controversial, and the medium as somehow undermining literacy and morality. Most recently, manga have been seen in this way. The enthusiasm of younger readers for the medium has resulted in some British media offering alarmist portrayals of manga, for example Owen (2004). The assumptions about manga typically include that only one style of art exists (with 'big eyes') that only one genre exists (science fiction) and one audience (older males interested only in sex and violence). To counter such assumptions I'd urge older non-readers to try some titles for younger readers (the major publishers put age suggestions on the covers) as a way of becoming familiar with manga.

In summary, seeing comics in a negative light starts from the premise that comics are bad for readers, thus making such views part of the debates around 'media effects' and 'moral panics'. In addition, this negative view often, inaccurately but firmly, positions comics as suitable only for children, making material aimed at adults seem more shocking.

In contrast, comics are also seen by some in a very positive way. One great champion of the medium, for readers of all ages, is Paul Gravett, who has written extensively about manga, graphic novels and comics. In effect, those seeing the comic in this light may comics accord the status of an art, taking a more typically European approach, whilst the former group sees them in the light of notions of an historical construction, that being as 'bad' mass culture. In addition, spaces are emerging for professionals to discuss comics, most notably the Graphic Novels in Libraries UK discussion list http://groups.google.co.uk/group/GNLIBUK?hl=en.

Comics are also seen in a third way, solely as a way of drawing poorer readers into literacy. Clearly, developing new readers is a good thing, but it does reveal a telling set of assumptions about comics. Here the comic is a 'bad thing', but a useful tool, a perspective that reflects a limited enthusiasm for the medium, something which younger readers pick up on.

This can have the result that comics are read by younger readers in an act of reading as rebellion, to antagonise those who disapprove. This in turn leads, as Styles and Watson suggest, to a cycle being established in that: "...the fact that children take such pleasure from these texts is enough to convince some commentators that they must be harmful." (Styles and Watson, 1996, p.179) Finding even a single title that you, as an older reader, can be enthusiastic about rather than simply feeling that you don't like the medium, or understand it, but can see that it appeals to others (a view I often come

across) avoids the possibility of alienating the younger readers you wish to engage with even if they do not like the titles that you do.

Another way of viewing graphic texts is to classify them as a different kind of text altogether from books, even though they typically are books. This is reflected in the way that comics appear as part of the Media Studies GCSE rather than elsewhere.

A final way of approaching graphic texts is to look at them from an academic point-of-view, as objects that reward study in various disciplines. The works created also show a range of underlying assumptions about comics, often in relation to issues around gender, and may reflect the key perspectives held above, or may explore them. A key text by Martin Barker (1989) Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics intended for adult readers offers a series of case studies which take a range of theoretical positions that can and have been used in relation to comics (including feminism) and interrogate them.

To conclude, whilst there are a range of ways of thinking about graphic texts in Britain, most of them exist in tension with one another, whether in classrooms or elsewhere. As Morag Styles and Victor Watson (1996) asserted, "Many teachers are aware that the comic is one of the best and most motivating genres for teaching reading..." (Styles and Watson, 1996, p.179) However, they also said that, "...this is too unsettling for those with fixed views of what children should read and how they should learn to do it" (Styles and Watson, 1996, p.179) indicating, as I suggested, the problematic cultural position of the comic.

Sharing Graphic Texts

When sharing these texts with young adult readers, it is possible to include then in a general 'book talking' session with a group, but, unlike a traditional novel, you cannot really read graphic texts aloud effectively. It is more likely that you will give a plot summary, or, if possible show a key page on screen using a visualiser, or other means, and talk about where it fits into the overall narrative. That kind of talk is best followed by giving readers an opportunity to just look through the books and ask questions. Just adding one graphic novel, or manga to the texts you discuss will flag up that these are books too, and enjoyable reads.

With this kind of text, you will often find groups of readers looking at them together, and their discussion is as likely to be about the artwork as the narrative, often analysing the text in very complex ways, demonstrating mastery and passion for their subject. Another response is an intense silent and individual contemplation. It is also quite common to share these books with pencils and paper in hand. For many readers a major response is to start to want to copy the artwork, create new narratives about the same characters or use the comic as inspiration for original work. Many current comic creators started as fans, copying the work of those they admired.

Another good way into sharing these texts is to talk through how the page is laid out, the grammar of the comic, as well as what the images depict and the narrative. A good text to help familiarise you with how comics work is the excellent Understanding Comics by Scott McCloud, which is also a comic. It is also worth looking at some of the texts that play with the basic rules. For instance, whilst most British and American

comics have around six to nine panels on a page, Raymond Briggs, in When the Wind Blows, sometimes uses twenty-five or more.

You may also want to talk about the overall layout of the book, thinking about the number of panels per page, the use of full-page images etc. Again, drawing on Briggs he makes use of single image double-page spreads in The Snowman to signify freedom. When the snowman and boy go flying the number of panels drops, whilst, at the end, the number increases again, as the boy returns to home and bed. Further, the use of the specific medium has an impact on how the story might be told. The use of soft pastel crayons in The Snowman contributes to the expansive feel of that book, as do the rounded panel shapes.

In contrast to young adults, it is much more challenging to share comics with very young readers. This can be shown with reference to The Snowman, a text seen as addressing precisely this group. To make sense of this text, the reader needs to understand the grammar of the comic book, for instance, how panels work. In an example located towards the end of the book, a page containing twelve panels showing the boy turning in his sleep over the remainder of the night and then waking up in the morning, demands that the reader understands that these are not twelve separate images of different boys (as someone unfamiliar with this kind of text might well assume) but a series of images of the same boy that should be read from left to right, and from top to bottom, as a sequence unfolding in time. That, even without the addition of speech bubbles, makes a lot of demands upon the reader.

Being aware of the way that one reads a comic, however, makes it easier to share that skill. Picture books that draw on the grammar of the comic, such as those by Colin McNaughton, with their use of panels and speech balloons, and comics like the Beano and Dandy, with their shorter stories can also open up this space for discussion with much younger readers. In addition, the challenging experience of starting to read manga, until one becomes familiar with that form, is a useful reminder of the challenges that reading in general presents to the emergent reader.

Talking about who the audience might be for any given book is also a useful way of sharing these texts. Age, gender, class, ethnicity, location and what knowledge readers have to bring to the book to make sense of it can all make for interesting discussion. For instance, one could argue that Ethel and Ernest could be seen as primarily addressing an older adult, British, white, middle-class reader. Such connotations could be read off from a number of aspects of the book, including the cover, which looks like a traditional ‘quality’ novel.

Another important consideration with sharing these texts, picking up on an earlier theme, is that of the gender of the reader. Male readers form the majority for most comics and graphic novels. The readers already involved with the medium are often very enthusiastic and enjoy the opportunity to share their knowledge. They may have a passion for a specific genre, or read more generally, and will talk about both image and text (offering the older reader a model of sharing these texts to use with other, less knowledgeable readers). Be prepared to learn a lot if talking with an enthusiastic younger reader of graphic texts. You will quite possibly end up with a list of what you should be reading.

What has changed in relation to gender and reading of graphic texts in very recent years is the introduction of manga to Britain. Typically, 60% of sales are to female readers. This means that for the first time since the collapse of the girls' comic in Britain (which came to pass largely in the 1980s, although it finally ended in 2001 when Bunty, the last of over fifty titles for girls, was retired) girls are reading comics. As with boys, they too will be expert, enthusiastic and, quite possibly, creating their own artwork.

Another important aspect of sharing these texts is to be prepared for surprises. One example of this is the way that the recently published manga Shakespeare books are being actively chosen by some younger readers for leisure reading. The series is also being picked up on in schools as a way of making the texts more accessible to younger readers. I have had similar experiences with Hunt Emerson's version of Rime of the Ancient Mariner (which is full text) receiving several requests as to whether the writer and artist had 'done any other books'.

Having made these general points about sharing graphic texts, it is important to remember that each book you choose will offer a unique set of possibilities for sharing. For instance, Ethel & Ernest by Raymond Briggs offers a decade in each chapter and contains references to shifts in education and culture in Britain, personalising cultural changes and so full of rich possibilities for discussion. Key pages include one in which Briggs gets a place at Grammar School, which shows his working class parents responses to what they see as their son's achievement. In particular, the father's comment that he hopes his son will not get too posh for the family articulates a great deal about shifting class and educational structures.

Evaluating Graphic Texts

In thinking about what qualities to look for in graphic texts, it may be useful to think about the following questions, which will help in relation to assessing any given text.

Audience. Who do you think the intended audience is in terms of age and gender? Is the language accessible for the audience you want to share it with? Are there several potential audiences? Is it a satisfying read for you? If this book were going to be put into a library, would it be located in the children's, teen or adult collections? How, if at all, could the book be used in a classroom?

Appearance. Is it physically well-produced and attractive? Does the cover art do justice to what is contained within (and vice versa)? Is the printing of high quality?

Layout. Is the text legible or is it obscured by illustration? Is the text hard to follow? Think about whether this is because of a lack of familiarity with the medium, or because of the layout. Does the graphic novel or manga make full and creative use of the full range of comic strip grammar and conventions? Are techniques from the language of film used? (such as flashbacks, establishing shots, tracking shots, close-ups, high and low angle shots, etc.)

Type. Is it fiction or non-fiction? If it is the latter, what is the subject area and how well is it covered?

Narrative. If the text is fiction, what, if any genre does it belong to? Is the storyline imaginative, coherent and interesting? What kinds of issues does it flag up and how does it handle them?

Colour/black and white. Is it printed in colour or black and white? If the images are black and white will they appeal to the target audience? Keep in mind that manga is typically black and white and that this has changed audience expectations (in that colour is no longer typically seen as the 'preferred norm' for younger readers).

Illustrations. Are the illustrations of a high technical and artistic standard? Do the illustrations merely adhere to the narrative sequence or do they provide a commentary/counterpoint/expansion on the written word? Do the illustrations move the story forward? Are the words and pictures interdependent?

Some Graphic Texts to Look Out For.

The list below suggests when a theme may make the text suitable for older readers.

Briggs, R (1998) Ethel & Ernest London: Cape (will predominantly appeal to older readers, but would be very useful in discussing history and memory across generations).

Coleridge, S.T. and Hunt Emerson (1989) Rime of the Ancient Mariner London: Knockabout Comics (will predominantly appeal to young adult readers)

Conlon, C (1998) Hairy Mary London: Slab-O-Concrete (will predominantly appeal to young adult readers. Several titles published).

Groening, M (1996) The Simpsons: Simpsorama, London: Titan Books, (all ages, many titles published, of which this is one example)

Groening, M (2004) Futurama London: Harper Collins Entertainment, (all ages, many titles published, of which this is one example)

Kumakura, Y (2006) Jing: King of Bandits, London: Tokyopop (Recommended for 13+ readers. 5 volumes forming a single coherent ongoing narrative)

Manga Shakespeare (Adaptations: for information see)
http://www.selfmadehero.com/manga_shakespeare/manga_shakespeare.html
(will predominantly appeal to young adult readers)

McCloud, S (1994) Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art New York: HarperCollins (will predominantly appeal to young adult and older readers)

Satrapi M (2003) Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood London: Jonathan Cape (will predominantly appeal to young adult and older readers)

Smith, J (2005) Bone: Vol 1: Out From Boneville New York: Graphix (all ages, 9 volumes forming a single coherent narrative)

Spiegelman, A. (1987) Maus I: A Survivors Tale. Harmondsworth: Penguin. And Maus II: And Here My Troubles Began (1992) Harmondsworth: Penguin. Initially published as a series in Raw (Raw Books & Graphics) from 1980-1991. (will appeal to young adult and older readers)

Takaya, N (1999-2006) Fruits Basket, London: Tokyopop (Recommended for 13+ readers. 15 volumes forming a single coherent ongoing narrative)

Talbot, B. (1996) The Tale of One Bad Rat. London: Titan Books. (will predominantly appeal to young adult and older readers)

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Ally Sloper's Half Holiday (1884-1914 and revived 1922-1923). London:WJ Sinkins/Dalziel/ The Sloperies/Milford

Barker, M. (1989) Comics: Ideology, Power and the Critics. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Beano (1938-date) Dundee: DC Thomson

Briggs, R (1998) Ethel & Ernest London: Cape

Briggs, R (1977) Fungus the Bogeyman London: Hamish Hamilton

Briggs, R (1978) The Snowman London: Hamish Hamilton

Briggs, R (1982) When the Wind Blows London: Hamish Hamilton

Bunty (1958-2001). Dundee: DC Thomson

Dandy (1937-date) Dundee: DC Thomson

Frank, A (1997) The Diary of a Young Girl London: Penguin

'Graphic Novels in Libraries UK' discussion list
http://groups.google.co.uk/group/GNLIBUK?hl=en.

Gravett, P (2004) Manga: Sixty Years of Japanese Comics. London: Laurence King Publishing.

Gravett, P (2005) Graphic Novels: Stories to Change Your Life. London: CollinsDesign.

Gravett, P (2006) Great British Comics. London: Aurum Press.

Jackie (1964-1993) Dundee: DC Thomson

McCloud, S. (1993) Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art. New York: Harper Perennial.

Owen, G, (2004) Child murder, incest and rape... is this really how our schools should be encouraging boys to read? Mail on Sunday, (21/11/04) p.49 (Available via http://forums.animeuknews.net/album_page.php?pic_id=38)

Styles, M. & Watson, V. (1996). Talking Pictures: Pictorial texts and young readers. London: Hodder and Stroughton.

Twinkle (1968-1999) Dundee: DC Thomson

Victor (1961-1992/3) Dundee: DC Thomson